

## **Two Wrongs and Two Rights: Reason and Responsibility**

Nancy M. Robinson

I am honored by the articulate comments of the respondents to the questions raised in the lead paper, "Two Wrongs Do Not Make a Right: Sacrificing the Needs of Gifted Students Does Not Solve Society's Unsolved Problems." These five colleagues have proved themselves to be sensitive to the multiple issues and constituencies involved and highly constructive in their suggestions of steps to be taken to right the wrongs to which I referred. While we may not agree on some of the details (more of this later), we seem, for the most part, to be on the same wavelength.

Karen Rogers recalls accurately the intense discomfort we felt at that Wallace Symposium. Most of the six of us were there, I think, enduring what we saw as a mean-spirited, yes, racist, discussion of the real-life effects of limitations in intellectual and economic resources. Karen is right, too, in commenting that with retirement comes the chance to say what you have previously been too timid to say, afraid of offending or having it heard as disrespectful.

### **What I Meant To Say Was . . .**

Perhaps I should restate my position about services for gifted students, who are defined by reason of their cognitive abilities and academic achievement, as students who *need* significantly more advanced academic fare than is available in the regular classroom. Self-contained classes in the elementary schools, special-entry classes at the secondary level, and various forms of acceleration are *among* the most effective and least expensive ways to provide such students with the challenge and rigor they need and deserve. They also are the options we happen to do best. (I do have the impression that self-contained classrooms are today more advanced and rigorous than they used to be.) There are, of course, other options, includ-

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ing regular-class differentiation of instruction and cluster grouping. Although these tend to be less stable in terms of district support and less expertly delivered, they are sometimes more appropriate for gifted students who have uneven profiles and for those who, as Donna Ford points out, just miss meeting the criteria for admission. Pull-out programs are much more expensive and difficult to do well, and generally meet only some of the academic needs of advanced students.

Academically highly accomplished students deserve our special efforts because we, like other developed nations, have decided that preparation for productive adulthood should focus on the study of language arts, mathematics, sciences, history, government, and the like. Most of the 6-hour school day is, therefore, occupied with these studies. These are subjects that most gifted children learn readily and with much more mature understanding than do their nongifted classmates. As a society, we have thereby created a situation in which denying gifted students appropriate programming not only stunts their development in these critical disciplines, it makes them miserable. As one of my students expressed it, "Sitting in a regular classroom is like watching a slow-motion movie 6 hours a day." Before long, the kindest hearted gifted youngsters become irritable, impatient, school-avoidant, and lonely for friends who can converse on the same level. They lose all incentive for hard work. And we have done this to them.

Solving this problem would be relatively straightforward if intellectual assets and conditions for optimal childrearing were distributed in our society more fairly than are economic assets. But they are not. Whatever may be the relative roles of family income, social status, race, ethnicity, culture, parenting skills, parent health, social supports, language, and genetics in determining which students need and are prepared for more advanced work—the truth is that disproportionality exists. And gifted children are being held accountable, so it seems, when we refuse them services because they are more often Caucasian or Asian and come from middle-class homes than they "should." *It is not their fault.*

One of the issues that I did not mention, but which undergirds most of my colleagues' responses, is that our public schools are so riddled with problems that the classes for gifted students often exist as oases of decent education, providing a *better* (not just more appropriately matched) education than is to be found elsewhere. Thus, we win and lose. Programs win by being seen as high-quality and worthy of keeping, but lose because they are seen as inequitable. It is important that we keep gifted programs on a par with regular classes

in terms of budgets, teacher training, class size, computer access, field trips, and the like and not permit them to become the "country club" (p. 279) that Callahan calls them. Extra expenses for initial assessment and transportation are inevitable, but we should not go beyond these to privilege gifted students or their teachers. Other families should perceive (accurately) that their own children would be miserable in the gifted program because of the inappropriate (for them) pace and level of instruction, but they should not have to envy the quality of what is being provided there.

### **Do We Agree on the Facts?**

I maintain that gifted programs have been made a political football largely because of their racially disproportionate enrollments. Many have been dropped, and others are under constant jeopardy. Donna Ford does not see it in quite the same way. She assumes, I gather, that there are a finite but stable number of spots in such programs and that the major problem is the racial distribution of the students allotted those spots. In her scenario, the situation is like that of affirmative action in postsecondary admissions in which colleges and universities each have a given number of places to distribute. In fact, unlike the majority of the benighted voters in my state, I favor affirmative action and active recruitment and admission of qualified students from traditionally underserved minorities, though not to the extreme that characterizes the unfortunate program Karen Rogers cites.

### **Do We Agree on the Students on Whom We Focus?**

One disagreement among us is that Rogers and I tend to focus on students with realized accomplishments, whereas several of the respondents see our primary goal as finding children of *potential*. Margie Kitano, for example, is willing to define giftedness as *either* high academic achievement or as evidenced by "creativity, problem solving, or resilience and persistence in the face of adversity" (p. 295). When she writes of a program, such as Open Gate, that has as its goal bringing promising students to the 80th percentile of achievement, I wonder how these students would keep up with highly gifted classmates whose work is significantly more advanced. Kitano and Olszewski-Kubilius point out the advantage of admitting students to programs so they will be exposed to high expecta-

tions, but expectations must be optimally calibrated to encourage children to stretch, not to *discourage* them.

We are, then, talking about essentially two different groups of children. One group is those with *realized* ability—the “traditionally” academically gifted that I say are being penalized through no fault of their own or of their families. The other group is the children of *promise* who may eventually blossom academically, given our high expectations and encouragement and with energetic, prolonged educational intervention. (Obviously, there are gradations of ability and of promise; children whose developmental profiles are uneven; and children of high ability who are burdened by learning disabilities, motivational issues, or both. I am not so naïve as to think that children can be so easily categorized.)

## **How Do We Identify Gifted Students?**

I am, as accused, an advocate for using psychometric measures of ability and achievement as a major part of the way we identify gifted children. They are the most objective reflections we have of what children have attained academically and what they are likely to do in the future. Of course we need to add a wide range of information in order not to miss children who were having a bad day or suffer test anxiety or show impressive attainment that is not reflected in the tests. The five respondents do not advocate ignoring psychometric information, but most contend that we should continue to seek less traditional means. It isn’t hard to find nontraditional measures that will identify more children of color. What is hard to find are *validated* nontraditional measures that reflect academic readiness for programs of rigor and predict academic success in such settings (National Research Council, 2002).

## **Are We Simply Missing Significant Numbers of Unidentified, Qualified Children of Color?**

When we hunt for unidentified gifted children of color, we are assuming that such children are being overlooked because of teacher prejudices and misperceptions. Donna Ford says that “Teachers are underreferring such students” (p. 289). A great many innovative efforts have attempted to find such children, and new efforts are being described all the time (e.g., Grantham, 2003). The evidence is not convincing, however, that children who have to be searched for

are in current need of special programming (National Research Council, 2002). It is not much of a trick to admit more students of color to our programs. The point is, can we do it wisely? Are we enhancing or limiting their success? It is not fair to ask promising children to cope with demands for which they are not prepared, thereby destroying their sense of themselves as resilient and successful.

### **Do We See “Potential” in the Same Way?**

There lurks another hidden disagreement here. I argue that disadvantage tends to take a profound toll on children, robbing them of fundamental assets in cognition, language, motivation, and energy. It begins early and its effects are long lasting—many of them permanent. I was in the field of developmental disabilities for 30 years, so I am aware of the tragic loss that can occur. For too many children, the conditions of their lives—beginning well before birth—destroy (not just suppress) the potential that was their birthright. A number of the respondents see it differently. They maintain, as Callahan says, “a strong belief in the existence of academic talent in all populations” (p. 276). I wish I had the same faith that we could uncover hidden potential so that giftedness would appear not only in all groups (which I do believe), but in the same proportions (which I don’t).

There is a paradox here. I count myself a devout liberal. The essence of a liberal philosophy is acceptance of people who are different, as well as the same, together with a generous commitment to meeting the needs of those who are experiencing difficulty. But, if we allow ourselves a pious blindness to the ultimate effects of society’s wrongs, we have helped no one. Donna Ford says that I dwell too much on past wrongs and too little on current ones, especially deficits in our poorer schools. I did not intend to do that. We continue to destroy young minds every day with the inequities that exist in our society—both in and out of schools. This does not imply that there is nothing to do. There certainly is.

### **Have I Sufficiently Recognized Society’s Multiple Wrongs?**

All the respondents except Rogers state that, to some degree, I have failed to describe the heavy burden specifically imposed by race and, secondarily, by gender on the development of intellectual talent and

that I have underestimated the degree to which these interact with socioeconomic status to create even heavier burdens. These burdens are incredibly heavy—and nowhere more malevolent than in the toll they take on children's development. Several of the respondents (Callahan, Kitano, and Olszewski-Kubilius) specifically cite the College Board (1999) study that reports discrepancies in school achievement by race, even when social class and parent education are equated. All the respondents, but perhaps most sympathetically Olszewski-Kubilius in her discussion of social networks, underscore the depth of the issues. Indeed, she suggests that students of color with the potential for high achievement should be moved into programs as quickly as possible, even with deficiencies, in order to set high standards for them, "develop motivation, provide programs that inoculate students against negative peer influences, and directly deal with the cultural issues" (p. 311).

My position is that creating racial proportionality in our academic programs is not a way to undo the wrongs of society in the past or the present. There are no quick fixes. I would like us to quit our obsession with counting students by the colors of their skin. It might make more sense to count students by whether they are receiving free or reduced lunches, but very little more sense.

### **Are Our Solutions Similar?**

All of us seem to be, as I said, on the same wavelength when it comes to long-range planning. The respondents cite a variety of intervention programs that differ in details, but are common in their long-range perspectives. All start in elementary school (typically by third grade, though earlier would be better) with comprehensive programs, many continuing in the summer. The outcomes are not necessarily expected to be immediate, but are expected to pay off at the secondary and postsecondary levels when students elect advanced courses and enter demanding colleges. Among the programs cited are Open Gate (Kitano), Catalyst 345 (Rogers), Project Excite (Olszewski-Kubilius), the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Young Scholars Program (Olszewski-Kubilius), and Project START (Callahan). Two programs not cited are Seattle's Rainier Scholars Program and New York's Prep for Prep.

Olszewski-Kubilius calls our attention to the powerful effects of social support systems to bolster what families can do for their children. From their social networks, she states, all children need "information, direct assistance and aid, guidance, material support,

and emotional support" (p. 306). Gifted children, in particular, need collaborative adults who recognize and value their talents and who value school achievement, members of their families and communities who value school achievement, positive school climates, parents who effectively manage the system, community mentors who provide tacit knowledge about educational and career systems, and so on. Olszewski-Kubilius argues, too, that we need to recognize "the differences within families of color and the differences within low-income families" (p. 307). She argues that, as a consequence, we need to treat gifted and potentially gifted children from disadvantaged backgrounds as individuals, forsaking a one-size-fits-all approach. I strongly agree. Conceptualizing issues and needs in this way provides the link between the more distal social reforms I discussed and the more proximal interventions needed by disadvantaged gifted and potentially gifted students.

### **Should We Just Shift the Focus of Programs for Gifted Students?**

Several respondents suggest that we should broaden the focus of programs for gifted students—indeed, for all students—through greater attention to the fine and applied arts or to second-language learning and literacy, for example. By so doing, we will discover additional students who are gifted in those domains, and we will have to find ways to address those gifts. But these will not be the same ways we most effectively meet the needs of the "academically gifted."

I agree that the arts have an important place in all children's education and that, by including them, students will emerge who are talented in those domains. If we add the new domains to the curriculum, we are obligated to support the highest degree of development in students gifted in those areas. I should point out, however, that it is unlikely in the near future, except in special schools, that the arts will occupy as many hours during the school day as do academic studies—or should—so artistically talented children will not be made as miserable by the regular curriculum as are academically talented children today. At the moment, though, most of our schools (not just our gifted programs) are narrowly focused. Indeed, they are becoming *more* so under pressures for accountability by even more narrowly conceived assessments. We are failing our obligation to those students who are talented according to these curricular emphases, and we owe them a more appropriate experience.

Margie Kitano emphasizes the degree to which a need to master

English may mask giftedness in children of immigrants (and, I would add, children of non-English monolingual American cultures). She suggests that, if we stress bilingualism and biliteracy for all students (a worthy agenda for many reasons), we will level the playing field for those who are learning English and for English-speaking students who are learning another language. We may overestimate, however, how long it takes gifted children to master English well enough to cope with high-level classes. Many do it with amazing rapidity. One highly successful 13-year-old in the University of Washington's program of early entrance to college had emigrated from the People's Republic of China less than 2 years before; another had come only 1 year before from Russia; and my own children coped beautifully in a tough French school some years back with only a year of part-time study before our sabbatical.

## Conclusion

This has been an interesting, respectful, and, in some ways, unsettling exchange. We don't agree completely on the questions. None of us has all the answers. It is, however, gratifying to see us on the same page—mostly—with respect to what we have to do. The *we* does not refer primarily to the giftedness community, of course, but to *all* of us, advantaged and disadvantaged, of all colors, of all walks of life, of all political persuasions. We all share responsibility for children's optimal development. Some children will be gifted—most won't—but every one of them deserves the best chance we can figure out how to give them.

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